



THE ALABAMA VETERAN

SUMMER 2021 ISSUE



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ADVA
ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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America's Finest"*

COMMISSIONER'S CORNER



COMMISSIONER KENT DAVIS

As National Military Appreciation Month came to a close last month, our entire country paused on Memorial Day to commemorate the sacrifices of the men and women who have died while defending the liberties that we have and enjoy as Americans. This year, as I prepared to speak at the Memorial Day program at the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort, I also thought of another type of fallen Veteran — not those who died on the battlefield, but those who succumb to invisible wounds after serving this great country.

The statistics of Veterans suicide in Alabama are tragic and alarming. This is a crisis that Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF) fight daily — and it's a war that we all need to actively combat if we want to create a long-term outcome. In mid-May, the Alabama's Challenge for Preventing Suicide Among SMVF was publicly announced in a news conference at the Alabama

State Capitol. Those in attendance included Gov. Kay Ivey, members from the Alabama Legislature, Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs, Alabama Department of Mental Health, Alabama Department of Public Health, Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Alabama National Guard, and non-profits including Still Serving Veterans and Veterans Recovery Resources. Media coverage was widespread. It was a good first step in addressing this issue — though it is only a first step.

I think it is important to mention not only each department and organization involved with the Alabama's Challenge program but also each person, which is why I've listed the team below. These individuals have done a fantastic job establishing the ground work in developing and maintaining partnerships statewide that will lead to the long-term impactful change that we seek. We will continue creating these partnerships and developing public service announcements and launching other campaigns that you will see on TV and social media and hear on the radio. We will also have boots on the ground in communities across Alabama finding businesses, non-profits, and other resources that are willing and ready to help Veterans combat this crisis.

Alabama's Challenge Team

Paulette Risher (Team Lead)	Brandon Miller
Kent Davis (Team Lead)	Chad Richmond
Rep. Neil Rafferty	John Kilpatrick
Rep. Ed Oliver	Mike Rudolph
Mike Conner	Katherine Moyer
Dr. Tammie McCurry	Scott Martin
Betsy Cagle	Richard Beatty
Sam Smith	Melissa Evans
Chaplain Anthony Holloway	Rachael Mosley
Dr. Ladi Kukoyi	April Turner
Dr. Karl Hamner	Anna Taylor
Dr. Joe Currier	Keith Lewis
Chaplain Brenda Cherry	Hugh Myrick
Bob Horton	Matt Gaff
Beverly Gebhardt	Celeste Dryjanski
Beverly Johnson	Robert Campbell



ADVA

COMMISSIONER

Kent Davis

Wendi Findley—Executive Assistant

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER OPERATIONS

Jeff Newton

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT

Robert Horton

DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL

Beverly Gebhardt

VETERANS HOMES PROGRAMS

Kim Justice—Executive Director

ALABAMA G.I. DEPENDENT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Kayla Kyle—Program Manager

ACCOUNTING

Dixie Black—Director

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Brandon Miller—Newsletter Editor

APPEAL & REVIEW DIVISION

Mark Sullivan—Manager

CEMETERY

Tony Ross—Director

FIELD OPERATIONS

Tim Edgil—District I Manager

Rogers Wilson—District II Manager

Lynda Jenkins—District III Manager

HEADQUARTERS RSA UNION

100 North Union Street, Suite 850

Montgomery, AL 36104

Telephone: (334) 242-5077

Fax: (334) 242-5102

MAILING ADDRESS

Alabama Dept. of Veterans Affairs

PO Box 1509

Montgomery, Alabama 36102-1509

INTERNET WEB ADDRESSES

Web: www.va.alabama.gov

E-Mail: adva@va.alabama.gov

REMEMBERING OUR NATION'S FALLEN HEROES ON MEMORIAL DAY

On May 31, we commemorated the sacrifices of the men and women who have died while defending the liberties that we have and enjoy as Americans.

As observations took place around the state, it was with gratitude and respect that our fallen heroes were honored during a ceremony at the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort.

The commemoration featured a wreath-laying ceremony, accompanied by the folding of an American Flag, a moment of silence followed by a rifle volley, the playing of Taps, and an Honor Guard salute. The cemetery also had an American flag at the grave of each fallen Alabama Veteran, which were placed by local members of the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts of America.

Robert Curtis Andry, a World War II Veteran in the Third Army, 761st Tank Battalion, delivered the keynote address. Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) Commissioner Kent Davis was a guest speaker.

"We are eternally indebted to those we honor today," said Commissioner Davis. "They have paid the supreme price to keep the torch of liberty burning. May God bless all of them. May God continue to bless our great country and state, and may God bless all of our military, Veterans, and their families for their service."



ALABAMA'S CHALLENGE

GOV. IVEY, STATE LEGISLATORS ALIGN FOR NEW VETERANS SUICIDE PREVENTION INITIATIVE

Gov. Kay Ivey, numerous state departments, and non-profits across the state announced a new initiative to prevent Veterans suicide in mid-May. Alabama's Challenge is an aligned effort between the legislative Task Force on Veterans' Suicide and the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF), which share a significant overlap in goals and team membership. The efforts were aligned in March 2021 through HJR 28, which also extended the Alabama Task Force on Veterans' Suicide created by HJR 151 through the last legislative day of the 2022 Regular Session.



ADVA Commissioner Kent Davis and Gov. Kay Ivey

HJR 151, which established the legislative Task Force on Veterans' Suicide, was proposed by Rep. Neil Rafferty and passed in May 2019. Rep. Rafferty, a Marine Veteran, saw a need to investigate the causes of and prevention of Veterans suicide after a friend and fellow Marine Veteran died by suicide.

"I am encouraged by the momentum of this effort here in Alabama to confront the disparate impact of mental health challenges that many in the Veteran community face, even years after they last wore the uniform," said Rep. Rafferty. "As a Marine Veteran who has been personally affected by the devastation following a fellow Veteran taking their own life, I understand the importance and immediacy of addressing this issue head on."

A continuing stigma with mental illness is a tragic reality for Veterans, with approximately 17 Veterans in the U.S. dying by suicide per day. In Alabama, the Veteran suicide rate is even higher than the national Veteran average and significantly higher than the national civilian average.

Recently released data shows nearly 18% of those who died by suicide in Alabama are Veterans, though only 9.1% of Alabamians have served. Male Veterans die by suicide at a rate 1.3 times higher than civilian counterparts, and for women Veterans it is 2.1 times higher.

This crisis led to the creation of Alabama's Challenge, an initiative targeted to inform SMVF of resources to ultimately prevent suicide.

In early 2020, Alabama was invited by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to participate in the Governor's Challenge. The well-established program has three specific focus areas:

- Identification and screening of SMVF who might be at risk
- Promote connectedness and improve care transitions
- Lethal means safety and safety planning

"The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs is honored to be partnered with Gov. Ivey's Office, the Alabama Legislature, the Alabama Department of Mental Health, the Alabama Department of Public Health, and countless other organizations for Alabama's Challenge," said Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner Kent Davis. "Suicide prevention is an important conversation within the Veteran community, and it takes everyone to battle this tragic reality. We are looking forward to partnering with great resources around the state as we continue to raise awareness about veteran suicide prevention."



Alabama's Challenge Co-Chair Paulette Risher

ALABAMA'S CHALLENGE

To begin the program, the Governor's Challenge team attended webinars on subjects including outreach to rural Veterans, garnering policy support, community collaboration, safe messaging, strategic communications, and engaging Veterans at risk. Objectives include:

- Implementing promising, best, and evidence-based practices to prevent and reduce suicide
- Engage with city, county, and state stakeholders to enhance and align local and state-wide suicide prevention efforts
- Understand the issues surrounding suicide prevention for SMVF
- Increase knowledge about the challenges and lessons learned in implementing best policies and practices by using state-to-state and community-to-community sharing

As the initiative continues to grow statewide, a focal point will be hot spots for suicide in Alabama, which will be identified through "heat maps." Branding campaigns are being created and implemented for Alabama's Challenge and public and private sector partners are being contacted to provide further resources for suicide prevention.



Co-Chair Kent Davis and the Alabama's Challenge team

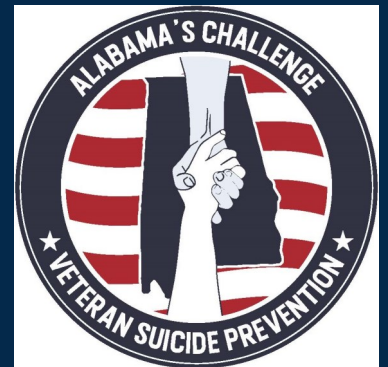


Alabama State Rep. Neil Rafferty

Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF) are at significantly higher risk for suicide than their civilian counterparts. Their service in defense of our nation and our state takes a toll which some find difficult to bear. Alabama's Challenge was established to address the needs of this community who are at risk for suicide. The seal was crafted to reflect the nature of both the effort and those it aims to serve.

In recognition of their service and sacrifice, the colors are patriotic though muted to reflect the gravity of the issue. The imagery of the hands depicts that assistance is within reach for those who seek it. One hand is above the other because this initiative provides a hand up, not a hand out. The silhouette of Alabama is placed in the middle of the seal to recognize that this is a statewide effort to assist Alabama SMVF. And finally, the seal is round to emulate a challenge coin, a symbol the military community is familiar with and which has been used historically to recognize the contributions of individuals and membership within its ranks.

Alabama SMVF face unique challenges and have earned this special consideration. The seal itself represents Alabama's commitment to serving the men and women who have bravely served our state and nation in uniform and the families that support them.



AROUND THE STATE

WORLD WAR II VETERAN CELEBRATES 100TH BIRTHDAY WITH PARADE AT STATE VETERANS HOME

Henry Burgess watched with enjoyment at the William F. Green State Veterans Home in Bay Minette as a parade of motorcycles and cars sported signs and banners wishing him a happy 100th birthday on May 21.

The Patriot Guard Riders and the VFW hosted the parade, which concluded with a salute to Burgess. He was also presented a quilt from Quilts of Valor Foundation.

Burgess, a life-long Mobile resident, served from 1942-46 and fought for 33 months in the China Offenses in Burma during World War II with the Army Air Force. He has multiple decorations and citations, including the American Campaign Medal, Good Conduct Medal, and Asiatic-Pacific Service Medal with three Bronze Stars.

Burgess is one of William F. Green's most active residents, often playing – and winning – bingo and visiting other Veterans in the home. On his birthday, he spent the day with his family. Burgess was married to Mary Rachel Burgess for 70 years prior to her passing in 2016, and they have four children, eight grandchildren, 14 great grandchildren, and one great, great grandchild.



MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL IS BACK — AND SO ARE SPECIALS FOR MILITARY MEMBERS AND VETERANS!

Minor League Baseball is back in full swing after being canceled last summer due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the return of baseball in Alabama also comes the return of specials for Veterans and military. The Montgomery Biscuits, Birmingham Barons and Rocket City Trash Pandas each had specials planned this season. A few discounts are still in play for 2021.

The Biscuits have designated all Wednesday night games as Military Wednesday, which includes discounts and specials on tickets, food, and drinks for Veterans and military members. Proof of service is required.

Remaining dates for Military Wednesday games are June 30, July 14, July 21, August 4, August 18, September 1, and September 15. The Biscuits also have Military Appreciation Night scheduled for Saturday, September 18.

If you're interested in a ticket package, the Biscuits have an offer for active members and Veterans that includes 10 undated tickets that can be used in any amount for any game, a \$20 Newk's Eatery gift card, and a Biscuits challenge coin. Packages start at \$80.

The Birmingham Barons plan to honor Veterans and the military with Salute to Armed Forces Night on September 11. The Saturday night game will also be 9/11 Remembrance Night and feature fireworks after the game.

GRAND OPENING OF ALABASTER VETERANS CENTER CELEBRATED WITH RIBBON CUTTING



Good news for Veterans in Shelby County! There's a new no-cost resource in Alabaster to support and assist their personal and Veteran-related needs.

On May 4, nearly 100 people gathered for a dedication ceremony and ribbon cutting to celebrate the grand opening of the Alabaster Veterans Center (AVC), a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization.

Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) Commissioner Kent Davis, Board of Directors President Lt. Col. Paul Gonthier, Board of Directors Vice President Lt. Col. James Billings, and Alabaster Mayor Scott Brakefield each spoke about the opportunities the new center brings Shelby County's 12,000-plus Veterans.

"The Alabaster Veterans Center is going to be a wonderful resource for the Veterans in the greater Alabaster area," said Commissioner Davis. "The partnership between American Legion Post 138 and the City of Alabaster is a true example of what is possible when there is a shared priority to help serve Veterans."

The AVC will allow Veterans in Shelby County to utilize and find the resources needed to navigate the many available programs, including job fairs, health screenings, employment seminars, and linking Veterans to health and educational benefits through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The grand opening completed a mission spanning nearly a year. The Alabaster City Council approved a resolution allowing American Legion Post 138 to utilize the city building, located on 1st Street SW, and organize and ultimately establish the AVC.

The Alabaster Veterans Center joins the ADVA's Veterans Service Office in Columbiana as a no-cost resource for Veterans in Shelby County. The ADVA has a Veterans Service Office in 60 of the state's 67 counties.

CONGRATULATIONS!

Veterans Service Officer Anthony Robinson (right) receives a retirement plaque from Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs District I Manager Tim Edgil. Anthony, a Vietnam Veteran, retired May 1 after more than 10 years of service to Alabama Veterans in Morgan County. Congratulations, Anthony, and thank you for your service!



WHICH NEW STATE LAWS WILL AFFECT ALABAMA VETERANS — AND WHEN?

The Legislature unanimously supported efforts to address Veteran suicide. **House Joint Resolution 28**, sponsored by Rep. Neil Rafferty, D-Birmingham, aligns the legislature's Task Force on Veterans' Suicide with the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF). This combined effort, titled Alabama's Challenge, was announced publicly by Gov. Kay Ivey on May 14. **House Bill 453** and **House Bill 309**, sponsored by Rep. Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, provide the Alabama's Challenge program much needed funding for fiscal years 2021 and 2022.

In addition to retirees, access to Alabama National Guard facilities will expand to include additional Veterans on August 1. **House Bill 416**, sponsored by Rep. Randy Wood, R-Anniston, grants access to the facilities, including gas stations and post or base exchange for certain Veterans including Medal of Honor and Purple Heart recipients, former prisoners of war, all service-connected disabled Veterans, and registered caregivers for such Veterans. The bill was drafted by the ADVA and coordinated with the Alabama National Guard to provide access similar to the recent federal legislation allowing access to federal installations.

Effective June 1, there's an expansion of Alabama National Guard survivor benefits. **Senate Bill 106**, sponsored by Sen. Will Barfoot, R-Montgomery, increases the authorized survivor benefits when members of the Alabama National Guard die from a service-related incident while serving on state active duty. This legislation increases the benefit to \$100,000 and dependents receiving the benefit become eligible for the Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship.

The Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship Program was extended to immediately allow more inclusivity. **House Bill 554**, sponsored by Rep. Kerry Rich, R-Guntersville, extends the benefit to include eligible dependents attending certain federally recognized programs for students with intellectual disabilities at Alabama public colleges and universities. Previously, the scholarship program was only permitted to pay for college-level classes.

Lastly, for members transitioning from the military, **Senate Bill 16**, sponsored by Sen. Andrew Jones, R-Centre, makes it easier for them to receive Alabama teaching credentials. This becomes effective June 1.

Other Bills Worth Noting

Senate Bill 123 (Sen. Tom Butler, R-Madison): As requested by the State Board of Veterans Affairs, this legislation gives the ADVA consideration of applicants who served during peace time and who may reside outside of county lines when hiring Veterans Service Officers. It also clarifies some administrative issues including expanding the agency's ability to inform Alabama's 400,000 veterans. (Effective July 1, 2021)

House Joint Resolution 27 (Rep. Dickie Drake, R-Leeds): Also requested by the State Board of Veterans Affairs, this legislation provides legislative support for the next major expansion at the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort. Dedicated in 2012 to provide dignified burials and a lasting memorial for Alabama Veterans, the cemetery is designed to be developed in phases. This support is expected to help secure federal grant funding to construct the next phase allowing ADVA to continue to provide this valued benefit to eligible Veterans and their dependents. (Currently effective)

House Bill 78 (Rep. Rhett Marques, R-Enterprise): Under current law, disabled Veterans are exempt from certain taxes and fees associated with obtaining certain license plates. This legislation would also exempt disabled Veterans from the associated issuance fees for the disabled Veteran license plate. (Effective Jan. 1, 2022)

House Bill 195 (Rep. K.L. Brown, R-Jacksonville): This legislation creates the Cold War license plate available to honorably discharged Veterans who served at any time between September 2, 1945 and December 26, 1991. (Effective Jan. 1, 2022)

Senate Bill 104 (Sen. Will Barfoot, R-Montgomery): This legislation provides lifetime hunting and fishing licenses at a reduced fee for Alabama Veterans who have a USDVA disability rating of 40% or more. Charged fees are based upon disability rating and/or age. (Effective Sept. 1, 2021)

Senate Bill 308 (Sen. Randy Price, R-Opelika): This legislation creates a statewide standardized process for concealed carry permits including a statewide database listing those individuals who are prohibited from acquiring a concealed carry permit. Currently, retired military members may be issued a concealed carry permit with no fee assessed by the sheriff. This legislation extends that benefit to include active-duty personnel and all honorably discharged Veterans who are otherwise authorized a concealed carry permit. The effective date will be determined based upon the completion of other provisions of the bill.